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## Children, youth and media: current perspectives

*Crianças, jovens e media: perspetivas atuais*

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## **CHILDREN, YOUTH AND MEDIA: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES** **CRIANÇAS, JOVENS E MEDIA: PERSPETIVAS ATUAIS**

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Over the past two decades, there has been a surge in research about the relationship between children, young people and the media, in terms of the number of studies produced, topics addressed and methodologies used. Due to its multidisciplinary nature, this area has affirmed its position in the field of Communication Sciences and has marked the scientific agenda and inspired public debate about the impact of the media on the lives of children and young people and how they use and appropriate information and produce media content. The digital age has created new media and platforms and generated a greater diversity of content, with children and young people using different ways of access and distinct consumption and communication practices. This situation has generated new research challenges, raised new topics and offers new clues to study the media world and its action on the identities, cultures and rights of children and young people.

At the time that this journal is being prepared and launched, the world is confronting the Covid-19 pandemic that has obliged people to spend weeks confined in their own homes. For many people, digital screens have been their main windows on the world. It is highly probable that children and families have spent yet more time in front of screens – to entertain themselves, talk to family and friends, from whom they are now distanced, and conduct their school activities, now provided via digital devices and in some countries, such as Portugal, also via television. Suddenly, awareness of digital inequalities has been revived, in terms of basic questions of access.

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has stimulated new avenues for research, in line with previous studies, while certain topics – such as social uses and parental mediation – have become even more relevant.

Current empirical evidence indicates that younger children are drawn to digital devices because their ease-of-use allows them to engage with their favourite apps and websites without the need for adult intervention, which engenders a personal sense of

agency, achievement and control over technology (Holloway, Green & Love, 2014; Neumann, 2014). Studies indicate that use of educational apps by children aged 2-3 helps them acquire pre-literacy skills (Troseth, Russo, & Strouse, 2016). Similarly, frequent use of apps that offer drawing, painting and shape-building tools has been found to enhance creativity and advanced motor skills among children aged four to five (Muis, Ranellucci, Trevors, & Duffy, 2015; Neumann, 2014). In both cases, the positive feedback provided by the apps during successful task completion has empowered children's learning processes – by increasing their sense of competence, independent accomplishment and self-worth (Muis, Ranellucci, Trevors, & Duffy, 2015; Neumann, 2014).

However, recent studies have also raised concerns about the potential negative outcomes of such digital devices on the development of younger children. One primary issue addresses parents' tendency to use smartphones and tablets as “pacifiers” or “shut-up toys” – i.e. they give mobile devices to children to keep them occupied, calm them down, as a reward, or as a disciplinary measure (Holloway, Green, & Love, 2014; Kabali et al., 2015; Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella, & Connell, 2013). Scholars argue that habitual use of digital devices to calm down children may disrupt the development of internal self-regulation mechanisms. Furthermore, intense engagement with interactive apps may displace language – and play-based interaction with caregivers, siblings or peers (Radesky, Schumacher, & Zuckerman, 2015).

Attention to long periods of use has also marked studies on the mediatization of childhood, in terms of the ways that media content and platforms influence all aspects of children's lives – from personal development to social life (Krotz, 2007). A notable longitudinal study in this context is the research by Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer and Sinner (2019) that followed 18 Austrian children and their families from disadvantaged social backgrounds, over a 12-year period. The study not only analysed the ways in which the media were present and used between childhood and late adolescence; it also analysed the way in which parental mediation has been marked by objective conditions of existence (*options to action*), subjective reading of these conditions (*outlines for action*) and cognitions and motivations to act (*competences for action*). Observation of the mediation environments between Portuguese families separated by two decades has also offered certain clues about the way that digital media has become a constitutive part of doing family. A comparison between families with young children in 1996, and families with young children twenty years later, has revealed that there are more parental mediation strategies, which seem to encapsulate children in a confident bubble of protection that prolongs childhood imagery and the associated romantic values (Ponte, Pereira & Castro, 2019).

A significant component of parent-child media behaviour consists of strategies applied by parents to mediate media use by their children. Until recently, the three main strategies identified in the literature have been *restrictive* mediation, in which parents set rules for media-use time and content selection; *instructive* mediation, including conversations about the content viewed, sharing of explanations and emotional responses and expression of critical attitudes towards the media; and *co-viewing*, in which parents

consume media together with their children (Lemish, 2015; Nathanson, 1999; Pereira, 1999; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999).

With the advance of digital media and its growing presence in children's lives, researchers have begun to explore new mediation strategies. While restrictive and instructive mediation continue to encompass all media, co-viewing has expanded to become *co-use*, including all forms of media-related activities. One innovation has been the inclusion of two new mediation categories - *supervision* and *technological* mediation. *Supervision* includes parents' attempts to remain close to their children when they engage in media use, keeping an eye on the screen. Parents who apply *technological* mediation help children acquire media skills (Li & Shin, 2017; Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Nikken & Schols, 2015). Digital media has also advanced the introduction of *participatory learning*, suggesting that parents and children use such media to interact and collaborate (Chiong & Shuler, 2010; Nikken & Schols, 2015; Schofield-Clark, 2011).

However the regular use of media by children and young people in their daily lives seems to remain out-of-step with its use in schools. In 2006, Buckingham stated that "increasing numbers of young people find the use of technology in schools limited, boring and irrelevant – particularly as compared with the ways in which they can use technology in their leisure time" (p. 2). More than a decade later, this was also one of the main conclusions of the European project, "Transliteracy – Transmedia Literacy". A study developed with Portuguese teenagers, in the framework of this project, revealed that there is considerable dissonance between what teenagers learn in classrooms and their everyday lives and concluded that:

media uses, practices, experiences and learning come into school by "people who live in students", but are not explored, discussed, or talked about. This educational, cultural and technological gap between the lives of young people inside and outside the classroom is not a recent phenomenon, but it became even more pronounced in the digital era, with the media everywhere and being taken by students in their own pockets. (Pereira, Fillol & Moura, 2019, p. 47)

Buckingham (2006) calls this gap the "new digital divide between home and school", and believes that bridging it requires special attention to young people's digital cultures.

As mentioned at the beginning, it is possible to assume, in light of the ongoing pandemic and the numerous constraints and challenges that it poses for families with children, that various types of media now assume an even more prominent place in families' lives. In other words, during the lockdown period, children have used media for longer periods of time and parents have become more dependent on media to facilitate various child-rearing routines. School itself is now reaching homes via screens, which should not be seen as a negative development. As noted by Dafna Lemish (2020), media may actually help children and parents during their prolonged periods of time at home. The variety of websites, TV programmes, applications and computer games can teach and amuse, release tensions, and safeguard people's health. Moreover, the new

interpersonal communication tools can make it easier to stay in touch with friends and relatives and provide learning frameworks during the school lockdown. Media can also provide shared viewing opportunities for families, and thereby foster a sense of togetherness and bonding during a stressful time, while parents may also employ media use as a replacement for parent-child interaction when they feel that they have less stamina for parenting.

On the other hand, parents should also be aware that extensive media exposure may overstimulate children's brains and foster aggressive behaviour, encourage sedentary habits and unhealthy eating, trigger fear and anxiety, and reduce the time available for other activities that promote physical and mental health (Lemish, 2020). Accordingly, parental mediation of children's media use is even more essential when parents and children spend a great deal of time together at home, aimed at deriving benefit from media use while reducing its negative effects.

In her influential blog *Parenting for a Digital Future*, Sonia Livingstone (2020) claims that this new "digital-by-default" reality also poses several major concerns, starting with the fact that not all families can afford the technology or connectivity to support home-schooling and not all children (especially those with special educational needs) can be reached and educated online. Moreover, many parents may find it difficult to locate and evaluate online resources appropriate for their children's abilities and their family's circumstances. Finally, this new reality highlights the danger of datafication and digital surveillance – whether by governments or businesses or both - as more of families' and children's private lives take place online (Livingstone, 2020). In this new reality, the media literacy of parents and children is more important than ever, in order to become more aware of online risks and strike the right balance between offline and online ways of life.

This volume dedicated to the relationship between children, young people and the media received an excellent response from national and foreign researchers, with the submission of around 50 papers. Using a double blind review process, we selected the nine articles of this issue. The contributors from various different countries, offer a transversal response to these questions, at both a thematic and methodological level. Nonetheless, their different social contexts underline the importance of the situation and its associated digital and non-digital conditions.

The first two articles, from Spain and Brazil, both share a participatory methodological orientation in terms of research involving children and young people, focusing not only on the voices, but also the eyes of children and young people, revealed through the choices of what they record in images and the way that they do it.

"Guided participation in youth media practices", by Julián de la Fuente Prieto, Rut Martínez-Borda and Pilar Lacasa Díaz, analyses a collaborative media literacy process based on culturally significant activities involving young people in Madrid, aged between 8 and 14 years old. These activities, conducted in photographic language workshops in the premises of the Telefonica Flagship Store, highlighted the potential of a collaborative learning environment to foster participants' critical attention towards their own practices. The discussion also highlighted the fact that having digital devices and being

connected to others via social networks from an early age enabled these young people to articulate online and offline activities linked to their interests. In this context, the images that they produced about themselves and their peers appeared as an expression of their identity and representation of habits marked by their intense media experience.

“Disposal and consumption: visual participatory narratives of children and adolescents living in Jardim Gramacho”, by Daniel Meirinho, explores the environments of digital and social exclusion of young people living in a community occupying a former landfill in Rio de Janeiro. The photographs produced by the participants (aged between four and 16 years old) in the context of the workshops organised by the author using the *photovoice* method, reveal how they visually represent social practices of contemporary consumption and their surrounding environment of discarded objects. On the basis of the photographic images recorded by these young authors and the subsequent discussion thereof, the author concludes that, for these children and adolescents living in an outlying neighbourhood, “the goods disposed and found in the trash make part of the constitution of social relationships and identities, of belonging to or distancing from the consumer society” (p. 51).

The following two articles – from Argentina and Portugal – analyse the migration to the home space, focusing on the technology-mediated relations found there.

Carolina Duek’s and Marina Moguillansky’s article, “Children, digital screens and family: parental mediation practices and gender”, explores digital parenting as a gender-influenced activity. The qualitative methodology used by the authors draws on personal experience with technology (in the form of “technobiographies”), by children and their mothers and fathers. The results of the survey of urban and middle-class families in Argentina reveal how “digital parenting is gendered, following broader cultural representations based on the heteronormative gender system of role assignment” (p. 65). For the authors, it is necessary to denaturalise social constructions of parenting reflected in the mediating intervention of technologies. They conclude that this denaturalisation of gender roles and the distribution of work in families in relation to children’s online activities will make an important contribution to the ways that families connect and interact with digital technologies and practices.

The article by Carla Cruz, Catarina Franco, Fábio Anunciação and Maria João Cunha – “Screens’ domestication in childhood: uses and parental mediation in city and rural contexts” – characterises the use of screens in function of the nature of the social environments – urban or rural – where Portuguese preschool children live and the ways in which their families intervene in the introduction and use of screens. The research uses a focus group methodology with children and their parents and reveals that there is no direct relationship between more urban environments and the use of screens. On the contrary, parents in more urban environments tend to have a greater perception of the risks associated with excessive exposure of children to technological devices and ensure that they are used less intensively. The article also concludes that the main parental motivation for children to use screens is the concern that their children may otherwise suffer social exclusion.

Bárbara Janiques and Lídia Marôpo focus on micro-celebrities, in “‘I’m sorry you don’t flag it when you advertise’: audience and commercial content on the *Sofia Barbosa* YouTube channel”. Using netnography to study the channel of Portuguese youtuber, Sofia Barbosa, the authors analyse the comments left by subscribers in a sample of 10 videos, while considering the visual, verbal and commercial aspects of the videos. The data indicates that a relationship of proximity and affinity has been created between the youtuber and her audiences, who approve and reciprocate her strategies of authenticity and intimacy. There are only occasional critical voices, due to the constant calls for viewers to consume products and the lack of transparency in relation to sponsorships. According to the authors, the results of this work help us understand the sociability of children and young people generated in the context of digital consumer cultures.

“Youth, science, and media: perceptions of Astronomy and Space Sciences in formal and informal contexts” – by Sara Anjos and Anabela Carvalho, highlights the perceptions of forty young people about science, in particular Astronomy and Space Sciences, while exploring how they appropriate scientific information to make decisions and form opinions. Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the results of the study reveal the importance of informal learning, in particular from the media, for the development of young people’s scientific literacy. In general, the participants in the study do not deliberately search for news about science, they do so casually, through the institutions that they follow on social networks, for example, which inspires them to undertake new and complementary research. One of the article’s key conclusions concerns the development of skills as potential content producers, in a convergence between science-based literacy and media literacy.

The following text, by Aurora Labio-Bernal, Lorena R. Romero-Domínguez and María José García-Orta, entitled “Protection of minors in the European digital audiovisual context: a necessary dialogue between parents, academy, regulators and industry”, concerns the issue of regulation and protection of minors. Researchers at the University of Seville, in Spain, defend the need to expand the scope of child protection in the current digital media environment, through the involvement of regulators, industry, academia and parents. To support and develop this idea, which is both a point of departure and arrival, they analyse secondary data from a database of documents and programmes from different institutions, while also analysing initiatives taken by European and Spanish companies, in order to verify whether measures to protect children with regard to the media are being implemented.

Joana Fillol and Sara Pereira are the authors of the article, “Children, young people and the news: a systematic literature review based on Communication Abstracts”. Applying the systematic literature review technique to the Communication Abstracts database, the authors aim to define the state of the art of a specific topic in children and media studies – the relationship between children and young people and the news. Based on a sample of 146 titles, the authors analyse the source of the studies, the areas that are more and less covered and the scientific journals that give them greater prominence. The results indicate that many of the approaches are based on reception and representation,

with fewer studies on production, and even fewer cases of works that focus on parental mediation and the ethical issues of journalistic coverage of cases that involve children and young people.

In the final article, children and young people are indirect subjects, while focusing on the digital skills and practices of primary and secondary school teachers in Montenegro. The authors, Ida Cortoni and Jelena Perovic, present the main conclusions of the “Global Kids Online” study, which was applied to a sample of 911 teachers from the country’s primary and secondary schools. Using the concept of “digital capital”, from the macro, meso and micro social perspectives, as its analytic model, the study points to the need for greater investment in education in the latter two levels. In terms of pedagogical innovation, the study also highlights the importance of developing teachers’ transversal skills in order to improve their digital awareness and critical analysis skills of the media.

This issue ends with an interview with Henry Jenkins, professor of Communication, Journalism, Film Arts and Education at the University of Southern California, conducted by Pedro Moura, a PhD student in Communication Sciences at the University of Minho. In “Children and youth cultures meet the challenges of participation”, Jenkins not only discusses the concept of participation – and the conditions, objectives and spaces in which this occurs – he also reflects on the importance of participatory culture in the context of a global crisis, wherein this reflection can also be transposed to the crisis caused by Covid-19. Through their conversation, Henry Jenkins and Pedro Moura leave us with a significant article to think about and achieve a fuller understanding of participation in the context of the cultures of children and young people.

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